Drew Hayden Taylor. *Sir John A: Acts of a Gentrified Ojibway Rebellion*. Talonbooks, 2018. 98 pp. ISBN: 9781772012149.
https://talonbooks.com/books/sir-john-a

Drew Hayden Taylor. *Cottagers and Indians*. Talonbooks, 2019. 72 pp. ISBN: 9781772012309.
https://talonbooks.com/books/cottagers-and-indians

The latest two plays by prolific Anishinawbe writer Drew Hayden Taylor continue his long history of combining humour with political and social critique. The plays each look at a recent controversy that has hit mainstream press in Canada. *Sir John A.* is "a historical, musical, comedic, biographical, political piece of the theatre" (x) that examines a topic that was a source of debate as the nation approached its 2017 sesquicentennial: the place of Canada's first Prime Minister in history, and whether the nation should continue to honour a man whose legacy includes the attempted genocide of the Indigenous peoples. *Cottagers and Indians* deals with the conflicts over land use that began in 2012 between seasonal residents, mainly from the metropolitan Toronto area, and the Anishinawbe food activist James Whetung, who has been reseeding manoomin, wild rice, in the lakes of the Kawartha region. In an era when the rhetoric of the settler-Canadian government is one of "Nation-to-Nation agreements" and "reconciliation," Taylor's plays demonstrate the limitations of such lofty goals by dramatizing these relationships through individuals from both cultures who interact and debate an individual issue. The difficulties the characters, who do learn to respect each other as people, have in coming to a mutual understanding on the issues under debate have larger implications. In the two plays, Taylor shows how citizens of a country that preaches tolerance and inclusion are not yet ready to engage in non-metaphoric decolonization.

The impetus for the plays indicates the good will that does exist on both sides of the cultural divide. The two plays were initially, and separately, written as commissions, and the dramatic texts both begin with prefaces in which Taylor places their genesis at the feet of artistic directors. Jillian Keiley of the National Arts Center in Ottawa contacted Taylor when Canada 150 "was fast approaching and the NAC was feeling obligated to do something about our founding prime minister" but, given the Indigenous protests that countered the mainstream celebration of Canada's sesquicentennial, Keiley had "come up with the idea of telling his story through the eyes of the Indigenous community that he so traumatized via his policies" (ix); the result was *Sir John A.* Likewise, Richard Rose of Tarragon Theatre in Toronto asked Taylor to write *Cottagers and Indians* after reading an article about the ongoing wild rice wars. The commissioning of these plays says much about the current political climate in Canada and the complex work that imaginative literature is being asked to do. Both of the involved theatre companies are known for including cutting edge, political theatre in their programming, but both are also well-respected artistic companies with a primarily non-Indigenous audience. Mainstream Canada is becoming increasingly aware of, and sympathetic towards, the historic and contemporary injustices faced by Indigenous people. Taylor's ability to, as he puts it, "explore and teach through humour" makes such difficult subject matter more palatable (*Cottagers* xi). At the same time, there is a danger that the very humour that allowed an audience of Torontonians to have "an unexpected and overwhelming appreciation" for a show in which Toronto cottage-goers are the villains

(*Cottagers* x), also might allow them to distance themselves from the more radical changes that the dramas are asking them to consider.

Both plays imagine conflicts between settler and Anishinawbe societies through debates between individual Anishinawbe protagonists and non-Indigenous blocking characters. In *Sir John A.* Bobby Rabbit, a character who added much of the humour and conflict to Taylor's earlier play *alterNatives*, convinces his friend Hugh to accompany him to Kingston, Ontario, where they plan to dig up the bones of Sir John A. Macdonald and hold them for ransom until a medicine bundle that was stolen from Bobby's late grandfather when he entered residential school, and is now held in a European museum, is returned to its rightful home. Along the way they pick up Anya, a hitchhiker who defends Macdonald as "a man of his times, historically speaking" (39) and the specter of Sir John himself has his say at the start of each scene. In *Cottagers and Indians* Taylor stages the wide-ranging debate as a conversation between two people, each of whom addressed the audience directly, trying to demonstrate the validity of their point of view. The protagonist, Arthur Cooper, is a fictionalized version of James Whetung, pursuing the same quest to reseed the lakes of his ancestral home with the food that was at the centre of their lifeways. His antagonist is Maureen Poole who, Arthur explains, "has dedicated her life to bringing an end to the good seed renaissance I am trying to generate" (7). She stands in for the "Save Pigeon Lake" group who opposed Whetung. While Taylor "tried to present both sides as fairly as [he] could" (*Cottagers* x), both plays favour the Anishinawbe of view, and the contemporary settler characters hit many of the same notes that establish their limitations. Both Anya and Maureen accuse the Indigenous characters of reverse racism; and both establish their sympathy for Indigenous people and causes by claiming to have read Thomas King. Despite these broad strokes, all the characters are well drawn, and their individual quirks and backstories provide a humour and emotion that makes the plays entertaining, rather than simply dramatized essays on contemporary affairs.

Both plays break the fourth wall in order to bring the audience into the debate. Early in *Sir John A.*, Hugh imagines "Standing center stage at the National Arts Center, singing my heart out to throngs and throngs of excited and devoted fans (*gesturing to the audience*). They love me" (5). The audience thus becomes a part of Hugh's fantasy, and a character in the production. The positioning of the play as a response to Canada 150 thus implicates the audience in the chief's refusal to back Bobby's quest because it "Might screw up all the Canada 150 celebrations" (13). Likewise, while the opening staging of *Cottagers and Indians* makes it appear as if Maureen is on her cottage deck and Arthur in a canoe on the lake, the latter soon steps out of the canoe onto the stage floor and addresses the audience directly: "What? You thought I was out on the lake? Silly people. You don't have to be on the water to sit in a canoe" (10), reminding them both that they are watching a fictionalized version of the events and, more importantly, that they might have to question their own expectations and assumptions in the drama.

The positioning of the audience within the drama also asks them to consider the real-world implications of the conflicts they are consuming as entertainment. Maureen's claim to "support Native issues" "in principle" is undercut as soon as her own property is affected "without consulting us" (31), embodying the positions of many liberals whose support does not extend to anything that might inconvenience them. Even Anya, the most complex of the white characters in either play, suggests that Taylor knows the limits of his audience's sympathy. As she chastises

Bobby for involving Hugh in his crazy plan, she says "I'm not unsympathetic. First Nations people have every right to be pissed off. To want to burn bridges and blockade roads, I get that, but it doesn't mean you actually have to. It's a metaphor" (52). The idea that resistance should be metaphorical rather than literal is dangerous, and speaks to the limitations of current discussions of decolonization, reconciliation, and Nation-to-Nation agreements. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang put it in "Decolonization is not a Metaphor": "When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future" (3). While stories of decolonial activism can effect change by inspiring action, that process only works if they move beyond metaphor. Watching or reading a Drew Hayden Taylor play can—like reading the works of Thomas King—make Canadians sympathetic to Indigenous causes, but the plays asks them to do much more. If audiences read a call to action as a metaphor, they are missing the point.

The conflicts of the play are ostensibly about the return of a single medicine bundle, and the reseeding of manoomin in a string of lakes—both issues in which a liberal audience can comfortably support the Indigenous heroes (so long as they do not own a cottage on that particular lake). These individual conflicts are, however, part of larger call for a non-metaphorical decolonization. As Bobby puts it, "Not everything can be settled and placated with an apology and a couple of cheques" (*Sir John A.* 49). In asking his audiences first to de-mythologize the man who created the nation-state of Canada and then to take the side of an Anishinawbe man over a white property-owner in a dispute over land use, Taylor is asking them to rethink the existence of the nation itself. As readers and viewers we are being asked to deny Maureen's claim that "We are all this lake" because "We are all Canadians" (*Cottagers* 8) because it erases the reality of Arthur and his family's history that predates the country, and to instead agree with Bobby's stance that "Your average Canadian is celebrating everything Canada has given them while we are still dealing with everything Canada took away" (*Sir John A*. 15).

The focus on land in conversations of nationhood, implicit in both plays, becomes explicit in the published version of *Cottagers and Indians*, which ends with a reprint of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's essay "Land & Reconciliation: Having the Right Conversations." Simpson places the rice wars firmly in the realm of non-metaphorical decolonization, and emphasizes the importance of land in that process. She asks "How can we 'advance the process of Canadian reconciliation' without talking about land?" (68), and explains that "Land is an important conversation for Indigenous Peoples and Canada to have because land is at the root of our conflicts. Far from asking settler Canadians to pack up and leave, it is crucial that we think about how we can better share land" (69). The only way to achieve reconciliation, she argues, is "to dismantle settler-colonialism as a system. Our current government needs to move beyond window dressing and begin to tackle the root causes of Indigenous oppression in Canada… It means giving back land, so we can rebuild and recover from the losses of the last four centuries and truly enter into a new relationship with Canada and Canadians" (Simpson 72). The inclusion of this essay provides a context in which to read the two plays, to think beyond sympathy for individual characters and their losses, and to imagine the structural inequalities that created the conflicts not only in the imagined literature, but also in the country Taylor depicts. Taylor's plays provide a call to action, but there is a danger that these calls will go unheeded by an audience that comes for the pure entertainment that the plays also provide.

Judith Leggatt, Lakehead University

Work Cited

Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*. 1:1 (2012) pp. 1-40. https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554